

FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: November 13, 2014

Agenda Item: Pheasant Bend Conservation Easement– Region 4

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Approval of final rule/action

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 minutes

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Background: FWP's Habitat MT and Upland Game Bird Programs are intending to partner with PPL Montana, MT Fish & Wildlife Conservation Trust, SCI, DU and PF to purchase a conservation easement from Olson Farms on 298 acres (aka Pheasant Bend CE) for \$280,000. The F&W Commission endorsed the course of action at the November 14, 2013 Commission meeting. The 298-acre property is located 0.5 miles south of Ulm, Cascade County (see maps). Pheasant Bend includes riparian, emergent and forested wetlands, native shrub grassland communities important to many wildlife species, including white-tailed deer, Merriam's turkeys, pheasant, waterfowl and numerous non-game wildlife species. The remainder of the property is managed as a working farm primarily for cereal grain production. Pheasant Bend adjoins the Ulm Fishing Access Site, administered by FWP, which incorporates 2 miles of Missouri River and Smith River frontage. The Pheasant Bend CE would compliment 3 existing nearby FWP Conservation Easements that protect habitats and provide public recreational opportunities on about 4,000 acres, including 14 miles of Missouri River bottomlands.

Public Involvement Process & Results: A public comment period for the EA and Management Plan ran from September 24 through October 23, 2014. A public meeting was held at the Ulm School on October 9, 2014 having zero (0) public in attendance. Twelve (12) written public comments were received to date (12 supportive of Proposed Action, 0 opposed to Proposed Action). Consideration and evaluation of public comment are distilled in the Decision Notice to the EA. All comments received remain on file at the Great Falls FWP office and are available for public review.

Alternatives and Analysis:

Alternative A (Preferred): This alternative is to purchase a conservation easement utilizing funding and habitat partnerships as mentioned above. FWP would hold and monitor the conservation easement.

Alternative B: This alternative addresses the option of not purchasing a conservation easement and purchasing the property fee title. The property is not offered for sale to FWP, therefore this alternative is not an option.

Alternative C: This alternative is that only FWP would purchase the conservation easement. This would result in loss of potential funding partnerships from PPL Montana, PF, DU, SCI and MFWCT. This would also result in loss of partnerships among these entities on a very important wildlife habitat conservation project.

Alternative D: This is a "no action" alternative and would not result in critical riparian and wetland habitat conservation. With no action, the land would most likely become subdivided or sold in the near future.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale: FWP recommends approval from the F&W Commission to proceed with purchasing the Pheasant Bend Conservation Easement from Olson Farms, using FWP and partner funds. This project will conserve and protect important riparian/wetland habitats along the Missouri and Smith Rivers while providing public hunting, trapping, hiking and wildlife viewing access on the property.

Proposed Motion: I move that the Commission approve the Department's recommendation to purchase the conservation easement from Olson Farms as described.